# GEORGE MERCER DAWSON

GEORGE M. DAWSON, C.M.G., LL.D., F.R.S., Director of the Geological Survey of Canada and an editor of the *American Anthropologist*, died on March 2, in his fifty-second year, of acute bronchitis, after an illness of but a few hours. In his death Canada loses her leading scientist, and North America one of her foremost geologists.

George Mercer Dawson was born at Pictou, Nova Scotia, August 1, 1849. His father, Sir J. William Dawson (who died in 1899), long known as principal of McGill University and still more widely known as the author of standard works on geology, archeology, and related topics, was Canada's most eminent scientist for decades; his mother, Lady Dawson (Margaret A. Y. Mercer), representative of a distinguished Edinburgh family, still occupies a prominent place in that scientific and educational circle in Montreal which grew up under the influence of her honored husband. Born with the best physical and intellectual endowments, young Dawson suffered a nearly fatal accident (involving a fracture of the spine) in infancy, which arrested bodily growth and resulted in permanent deformity; yet the misfortune was so far counteracted by early treatment and training, and so far overcome later by inherent vigor, that its victim achieved distinction in his maturity as one of Canada's hardiest explorers, while his intellectual accomplishments could hardly have been enhanced by any physical advantages.

Dawson's earlier education was acquired partly in Montreal, partly in Edinburgh; later he took a partial course in McGill University, followed by a course in the Royal School of Mines (London), 1869–1872, where he not only graduated with honors but took

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the Duke of Cornwall scholarship and the Edward Forbes prize, and received the highly-prized title of Associate. Returning to Canada, he began original researches in geology. In 1873 he was appointed geologist and botanist of the British North American Boundary Commission, and his report is one of the classics of Canadian geology. In 1875 he was appointed on the staff of the Canadian Geological Survey, and entered on a remarkable career of exploration of northwestern North America; his work including extended reconnaissances of the Liard and Yukon valleys, of the Canadian Rocky mountains, and of British Columbia. During these travels and researches he came in frequent contact with aboriginal tribes, and did excellent work in recording their characteristics and customs and in collecting their languages. In 1883 he was made Assistant Director of the Geological Survey Department; in 1891 he became a fellow of the Royal Society of England, and during the same year received the Bigsby medal for eminent researches in geology. In 1891 and 1892 he served as one of the British Bering Sea Commissioners, for which service he was decorated by the late Queen and Empress Victoria with the order of Companion of Saint Michael and Saint George; and about the same time degrees were conferred on him by McGill University and Queen's College. In 1893 he was elected president of the Royal Society of Canada; on the retirement of Sir Alfred Selwyn in 1895, he was appointed Director of the Geological Survey; and when an Ethnological Survey of Canada (modeled after the Ethnographical Survey of the United Kingdom and thus after the Bureau of American Ethnology) was instituted in 1896, he was placed at the head of the Survey Committee.

It falls to few men to have so many high honors and grave responsibilities thrust on them in so short a period; the succession is probably without parallel in Canada's history; yet it is the common judgment that the honors were fully merited, the responsibilities borne in such manner as to add renown to the country and the crown. Dr Dawson's career was a credit to Canada, and

an eloquent testimony to the wisdom of the nation in recognizing and utilizing the talents of her sons.

One of Dr Dawson's earliest contributions to ethnology was a memoir on the Haida Indians of Queen Charlotte islands, published in the form of an appendix to the Report of the Geological Survey of Canada for 1878–79 (pp. 103–189, pls. III–XIV); a contribution made noteworthy by the novelty and extent of the observations and the comprehensiveness of the record. Four years later he, in association with W. Fraser Tolmie, prepared a valuable series of "Comparative Vocabularies of the Indian Tribes of British Columbia, with a Map Illustrating Distribution," which were published by the Geological Survey in 1884; and he appended a valuable series of notes on the aborigines of the Yukon district and adjacent territory to the Survey Report of 1887–88 (pp. 191–213). About the same time he prepared for the Royal Society of Canada a memoir on the Kwakiutl people of Vancouver island and adjacent coasts, with an extended vocabulary (Trans. Roy. Soc. Can., vol. V, sec. II, 1887, pp. 1–36, with plate); and still more comprehensive was his subsequent memoir entitled "Notes on the Shuswap People of British Columbia" (ibid., vol. IX, sec. II, 1891, pp. 3–44, pl. vi). A "Note on the Occurrence of Jade in British Columbia, and its Employment by the Natives" was published in 1887 in the *Canadian Record of Science;* and a summary sketch of the "Past and Present Condition of the Indians of Canada" appeared in the *Canadian Naturalist*, vol. IX, 1881. In 1884 the British Association for the Advancement of Science appointed a committee to investigate the physical characters, languages, and industrial and social condition of the northwestern tribes of Canada, of which committee Dr Dawson was made a member; and by reason of previous familiarity with the subject, acquaintance with territory and tribes, and presence on the ground, it naturally fell mainly to him to organize and administer the work of the committee. The work was carried forward with great economy under small grants, and the reports of the collaborators (among whom

Dr Boas deserves especial mention) were published annually up to the institution of the more formal survey in 1896.

While several of Dr Dawson's titles and the prefatory remarks in some of his papers imply that his ethnologic researches were subsidiary to his geologic work, and while his busy life never afforded opportunity for monographic treatment of Canada's aborigines, it is nevertheless true that he made original observations and records of standard value, that much of his work is still unique, and that his contributions, both personal and indirect, materially enlarged knowledge of our native tribes. It is well within bounds to say that, in addition to his other gifts to knowledge, George M. Dawson was one of Canada's foremost contributors to ethnology, and one of that handful of original observers whose work affords the foundation for scientific knowledge of the North American natives.

Primarily a geologist, Dawson did his work in such wise as to aid in the solution of fundamental problems in archeology, and so to illumine various aspects of anthropology. When he returned from the Royal School of Mines to the land of his nativity, he found the geologists of Canada and the United States at issue concerning the later periods and episodes of geologic history. The differences were natural; they grew out of the fact that each group of earth-students began with the phenomena of their respective fields—those of Canada with late-glacial, aqueo-glacial, and glacial deposits only, those of the United States with earlier glacial deposits chiefly—and extended inference too far into the neighboring field; yet the differences were none the less unfortunate and obstructive of progress. Young Dawson wisely avoided controversy, but gradually extended observation over the more northerly field, gradually systemized knowledge of the Pleistocene history of the northland, gradually brought the stern logic of facts to bear on the general interpretations, and in this manner contributed more than any associate—probably more than any contemporary—toward harmonizing the discrepant readings of the

records of rocks and ice. Today the leading geologists of Canada and northern United States are practically at one as to the later episodes of earth-making; they are in substantial agreement as to the geologic time-scale by which the antiquity of man on the western hemisphere is to be measured; and for this happy condition they are indebted to no one more than the sagacious and far-sighted student whose untimely end they are united in mourning.

Time was when progress was mainly material, and when he who made two blades of grass to grow where one grew before was a great human benefactor; now horizons have widened, and progress has changed its course so far that he who sows ideas and harvests knowledge is coming to be reckoned among the greatest of benefactors. Of such was Dawson's work; gaining broader knowledge of his country than any predecessor, he gathered the wide-spreading strands in single grasp; writing treatises on geologic history among the most masterly ever penned, he was able to look from the past through the present and into the future far more clearly than most of his fellows; so his surveys of natural resources and possible utilizations contributed in unexcelled degree to the welfare of his nation and others, while the light of his knowledge and the radiance of his example have raised in due measure the intellectual plane of the western world.

Dawson was one of the men who left the world better because he lived in it.

W J M.